BEAUTY STROKE PARANOIA
@ THE FLICK OF A PIXEL
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FUTURE SOUND OF LONDON

PSYCHE OUT

CHRIS CAMPION

Illustration by John Borruso

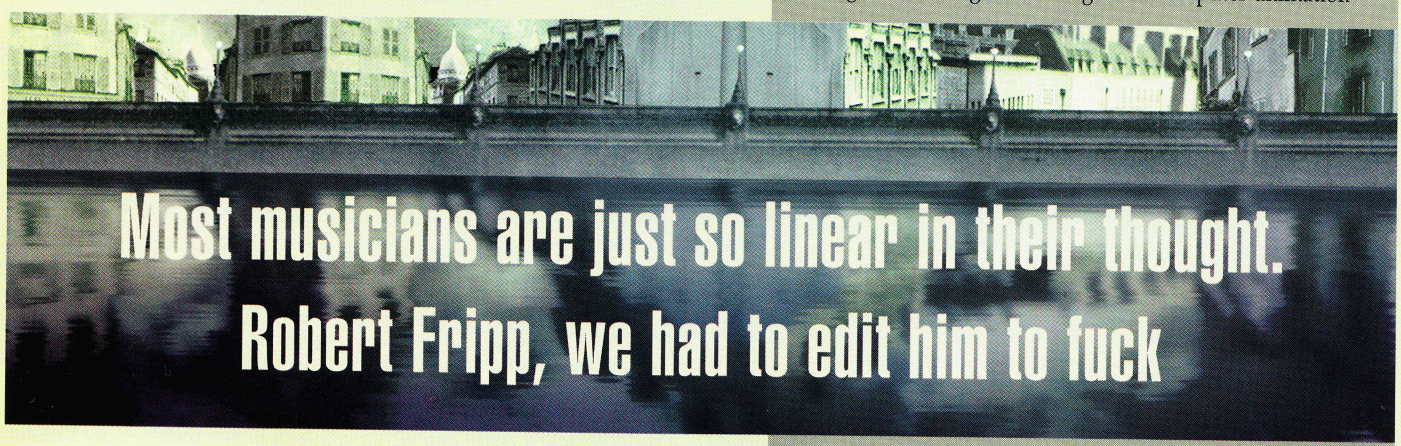
M2: How live was the radio show? Was every performance different?
GC: Slightly, although we have a slight problem with voice content, which has become quite important because what we're trying to do is, we're trying to not only be self-indulgent and play all our own music but also try to entertain people that won't necessarily be lying down listening to our music.

The whole nature of electronic music is changing. It should be about variety and as much variety and dynamic to undynamic as possible, and that's kind of where our heads are now. That actually means that if we mix the whole history of music—which is what we're doing—that's why radio is quite good for us. It means we can nick samples from Rachmaninov and have Miles Davis playing over the top, and really start varying it like we've never done on vinyl. 'Cause the day we present a finished album with four thousand samples on it clear is the day we get dropped! I'm not saying that's a bad idea, but it might be.
BD: It's an option!
GC: It's an option we have open to us. [*laughs*]

M2: What kind of reaction did you get from the tour?
GC: Well, actually we get a lot of letters, and this is where I realize that my whole philosophy is correct because, I get more feedback from radio shows than I do vinyl. That's suggesting to me that we've hit upon a new type of product by doing the radio show. I like that because I think broadcasting should be about giving away stuff, and quality. And industries are very scared about giving away stuff through TV and radio. I think that's all wrong.

We're kind of a high technology/low technology, high budget/low budget contradiction. We can reach people with a radio show and not have to go on the road to gig because we're hitting a couple of million people on the radio show. I think people, if they turn on the radio, which is normally a very passive medium —I'm quite unmoved by it normally—if you just randomly tune into a radio show and find yourself blown away I think that makes far more of a mark on people. These mediums are there to be used.

M2: The performance on *Radio One* was overall much darker than the material on *Lifeforms*. It was quite shocking to hear it being broadcast on a national radio station.
GC: That's the beauty I think. Live radio *is* scary at the time—like the Orson Welles news broadcasts.



Riphead Rex

At a time when digital art is the norm for music industry packaging, Buggy G. Riphead's art stands out from the untidy trail of Mac-lazy KPT-inspired covers. Buggy G. conceives and creates the awesome digital collages for FSOL's music, and his work relationship with Cobain and Dougans goes back some eight years to a project for MTV's Ultratech—a half-hour video of epileptic graphics accompanied by their hard and fast techno. He recently art-directed *Lifeforms*, their 6 minute video that explores digitally-generated alien landscapes and creatures. (The omni-directional tentacled fluid spike was modeled for animation by Olaf Wendt at 2:4; the animation was done by Stuart Gordon at Digital Arts.) It's a trailer for the 40-something minute version, *Yage*.

"There's some intrigue there, but it's not because of the actual technical capabilities or means of production. It's the content that's important."

What he's achieved is an eerie marriage between naturalistic photography and digital nature. He's filming more naturalistic footage to be merged with high-end computer animation—weathered rock formations, desert orchids, ancient temples and that girl rising out of the Dead Sea. The speed of the edits creates an ecstatic montage, a perceptual overload that's both exhilarating and hypnotic.

"I'll show you my latest snaps. I've only been back two weeks now from the Western Sahara. The only stock photograph that we used on the *Lifeforms* cover was the amoeba and the back of the desert. All the rest of them I've done myself. I never appropriate other people's stuff. Travel is sort of my inspiration."

While claustrophobia and friction drive Cobain and Douglas, wild open almost desolate spaces fuel Buggy—and it's the marriage of the two make FSOL such a confusing proposition: remorselessly ethereal, starkly oneiric. As for the ephemera that populate his landscapes:

" I dream quite a lot. I dream a lot better in the desert. I'd like to create something very hyperreal, very surreal, not in reverence to it, but some of the stuff Salvador Dali was doing. It's visual poetry, that's what I'm trying to create. I think Ansel Adams said something many years ago: *in the presence of extraordinary reality, consciousness takes the place of the imagination.*"

Future Sound Of London's *music contains viral strains of an alien fiction. Burroughs' insect consciousness. Phil Dick's paranoid schizophrenic projections. Electronic effluvia splashed across a liquid sky. Broadcasting their alienation out to the world, they have produced a number of rare techno artifacts.*

These have been generated almost wholly from within the Analogue Room at their Earthbeat Studio in Dollis Hill, a drab gray suburb of London. This is their space, the heart of the web. Obsessively they record, control and define their environment. All information captured and consumed is fed through the FSOL processing center before being regurgitated and re-broadcast. Recently their activities included a live tour for which, in typical FSOL style, they never left the studio. Instead they mixed new material live for two hours, sent their digital excitations down an ISDN line to BBC Radio One who then transmitted it out over airwaves. Stamping the transmission with their Internet address allowed people to request a compressed QuickTime version of their recent Lifeforms *video. Gigs on the Internet can't be far behind.*

Lifeforms, *as a 90 minute CD of evolutionary pathways, has been received with euphoria, and the 40-minute single version —the fruit of a collaboration with Liz Fraser—is finally set to appear after months of behind-the-scenes inter-record company wranglings.*

Gary Cobain and Brian Dougans find themselves caught between playing the pop star game required by a Top Ten UK album and the anonymity afforded them by the electronic media used to create their public image (or lack of). They recorded Tales of Ephedrina *as their alter ego* Amorphous Androgynous. *Heaping irony on paradox, Cobain claims to be writing a book called* The Psychology of Facelessness *for a future electronic publishing project. This facelessness suggests they see Future Sound Of London as primarily a broadcasting unit—creating virtual performances that are stark displays of paranoia and fear.*

Paranoia isn't confined to their music. Less than a couple of minutes inside their sanctum and accusations of industrial espionage surface. Suddenly it clicks why it has taken over three months haggling the record company to arrange this interview.

Brian is wary, pacing behind the control desk, keeping it between him and the intruder. Gary hasn't arrived yet and the accusations have to be answered carefully if the interview is to take place at all. Mistaken identity, I claim, assuaging his fears. He drops the matter reluctantly.

Today the video screens are blank, images replaced by quiet music played at a soothing volume. Their interview apparently changed but the behavior patterns have not. Brian Dougans stalks around in the far corners of the studio always at the periphery of vision, playing records and rolling spliffs. He smokes, listens, and very occasionally passes comment as Gary Cobain sits and talks, and talks, contradicting himself at the same time as he is weaving the FSOL mythos. It is uncertain whether when Gary says things he is talking for the both of them, or for Future Sound Of London as an entity, or just to please himself. At a certain level of technological sophistication, paranoia becomes the ambient track—which is raw and unnerving itself.

M2: Who's that Girl?
BD: Which girl?

M2: That one. [*points to the FSOL* Lifeforms *Poster on the wall of the studio*] She's the only human element in your public image?
GC: I think electronic art has got very lazy. It sets itself out to be very weird, but it's very Mac-lazy. So we wanted something that, like the music, had a human feel but was put through the machine. So we came up with the idea of, like Led Zep and these old great spliff-up covers, that we'd get a girl.

M2: She's also the only non-digitally created image in the *Lifeforms* video. Is the rest of the *Yage* video going to contain further photographed images?
GC: I think that electronic music, electronic imagery is going to become a very interesting hybrid in the next couple of years. You're going to get very unusual filmic plots getting involved with computing sections but filmic plot's just as abstract as the computer plots.

The next video we're doing is actually an offshoot of this one. You get some of the same scenarios but they act like a game and veer off in completely new ways. It's kinda like a weird remix. Certain elements that you've got in that video, you go inside them and explore them as completely new worlds again. That's how the game and the film are unfolding in a natural evolution, which is our whole philosophical way of writing and making music anyway. Rather than working out storylines, we work and build in the creative environment.

In the same breath, we're developing a game with Sony which is a new kind of philosophical game based on beauty stroke paranoia. [*chuckles*] Rather than shooting people, you just flick into completely different worlds at the touch of a wrong pixel, or right pixel, whatever. And the beauty about this new Sony system is that it's up to the graphics and the sound quality. It's going to be launched next year and it's pretty mind-blowing. For the first time a computer game can handle the kind of images we've been spending years trying to generate.

M2: You seem to be quite happy working in several different media at once.
GC: I think that's the beauty about new electronic music and media, that everyone's a polymath. It's our philosophy that the whole web is there. Music and vinyl, that's a music industry thing, you know? "Vinyl is the be-all and end-all. All roots lead to the vinyl and vinyl is selling it." That's not our philosophy. Our philosophy is that we are creatives that can encompass any medium. We tried to sell our cover to Virgin for £150,000 maintaining that it was a work of art, just because the art field can't quite figure it out yet—'cause they're up their own arses as much as the music industry, the TV industry and radio. All these mediums are really fucking up.

M2: Did Virgin go for it?
GC: No, we retained rights. That was quite important. We're as wide as fuck in a way, but in a way our creative vision, if we don't go for it then in the future somebody will. 'Cause our vision is a time when vinyl is not the be-all and end-all of what we do. We're not going to try and release the radio thing as a live recording, but we could.

M2: I can appreciate the fact that if someone had turned that on halfway through they'd be just like, "What the fuck?"
GC: [*laughs*] There were some quite heavy sections in it. The beauty about it is it's so fucking viable! Radio stations are thinking, "The way they cut in these voices is far more interesting than our top DJ's They've got all these different perspectives, these philosophies coming out of these speakers." And you don't have to believe in them!

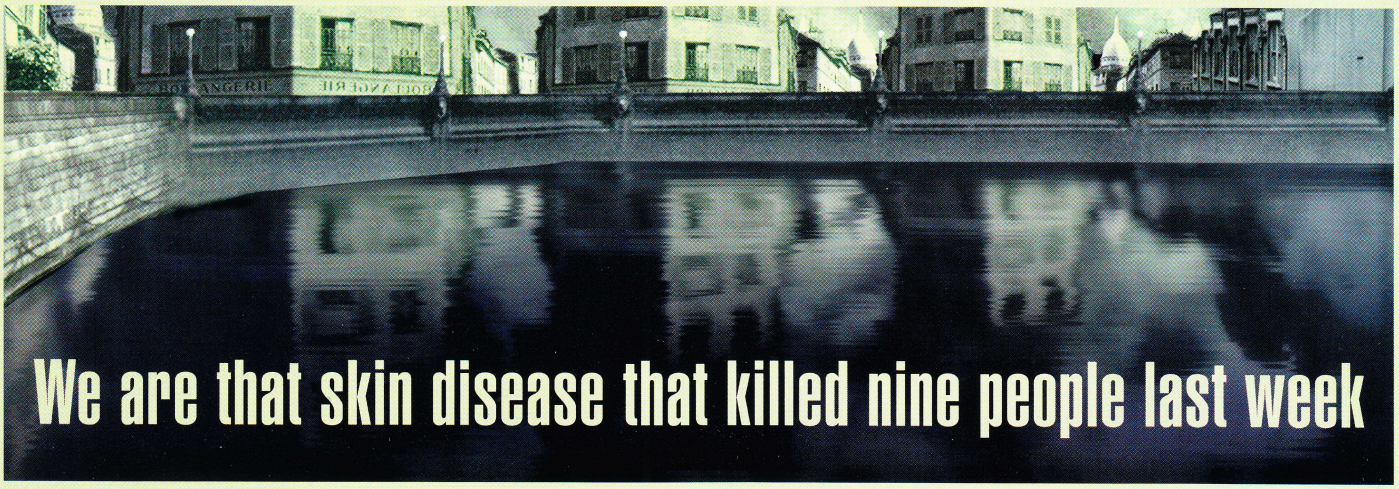
We might use an actor's voice or just cut out a line and have them speaking to somebody else from another film, and give it a weird abstract meaning. And yet you feel more from it than you would from a direct DJ and that's quite evocative. That means we've got fifty DJ's in one show.

We've both tried to be DJ's. The first radio show we did we tried to be DJ's and I spoke. I was doing similar things to what we're doing now but in a lot shallower sense. That's why we moved on, because I was incapable of becoming this actor. We both became actors for a period of time. We were doing these scenarios, quite similar to now but we didn't have the depth of Bruce Dern's voice or whoever.

M2: Does it scare you?
GC: Yeah, well... I don't know how much longer I can continue. [*nervous laughter*] 'Cause it does take you to the brink. You've got to remember that our philosophy is that this is basically a recording environment, and we record everything.

It's like the *Video Diaries* [*a DIY-TV show on the BBC—eds*] which I think make very interesting television. If you put the camera on yourself long enough, and then edit the bits, then I think you are as interesting as anybody else. Certainly as interesting as Janet Jackson and her three minute pop promos.

M2: A lot of your press seems to suggest that this studio is pretty much a hermetic environment, and that you spend an unhealthy amount of time working in here.
GC: Again, things change. We've tried to cut it down; tried to quell the illness. It's not that we work here all the time. It's that everything in our lives, unfortunately, is about collecting audio and visual and that means that what used to be game machines, like having a video camera, we used to derive immense pleasure from going out with a video camera years ago when we didn't own them—now I have to take them round with me. To go the park! I am working 'cause I know I'm collecting. It's digital sound. I'm collecting digital sound from around the park that I can sample! And in that way we are always working and we're always completely lagging behind in our lives. We're just like electronic librarians. We're behind in the history of sound, and sound is just going on around us right now. And I'm missing great samples. In that way we're always working.



M2: You also made the *Yage* video available over the Internet during the broadcast. What's your impression of Internet as a medium?
GC: Internet's a weird one. So far I've found it quite an interesting medium. I think what's happened is that we've had the extreme sociability thing, and we didn't find it fulfilling and have become reclusive for some reason although we are lovers of human beings.

I think we're an electronic illness and we're coming through radio stations now into your home. In fact we've already had a couple of letters about guys who have been fornicating and stopped midway. It's like yeah! Within a month that guy's going to be sterile if he keeps listening to us. We're an impotence that means there's going to be no babies born in this country, and we're going to come through TVs soon and have the same effect! We are that skin disease that killed nine people last week. This weird bug.

M2: Ambient music creates an alternative space for people to immerse themselves in and escape harsher and more mundane realities. Is the music your escape too?
GC: It's not an escape. It's a horrible, brutal face-to-face mirror that surrounds me. I think our music is sordid in how honest and how reflective it is. The other thing about it is it's very much narcissistic, it's totally us and our space.

M2: That sounds kind of obsessive.
GC: It is, actually. FSOL is very obsessive, because I've got a lifetime and we've got to think of so many areas of communication and creativity that we want to pursue, and I just want to see them, not understood more, but I want to achieve some of them. Because I think in the future what we're talking about will just be natural course. I think you will get that amazing film that is audiovisual in a new sense, not in the sense that it's been around for fifteen years.

Everybody talks about audiovisual now. It was like this cool thing from the 80's that the Cabs [Cabaret Voltaire] and everyone else had espoused. The idea is to take it into dedicated spaces—as we perceive cinema and the sound system should be.

M2: Which is?
GC: Well, it's probably us performing in a throwback to the 20's in an orchestra pit. So we'll be playing live but you won't look want to look at us!

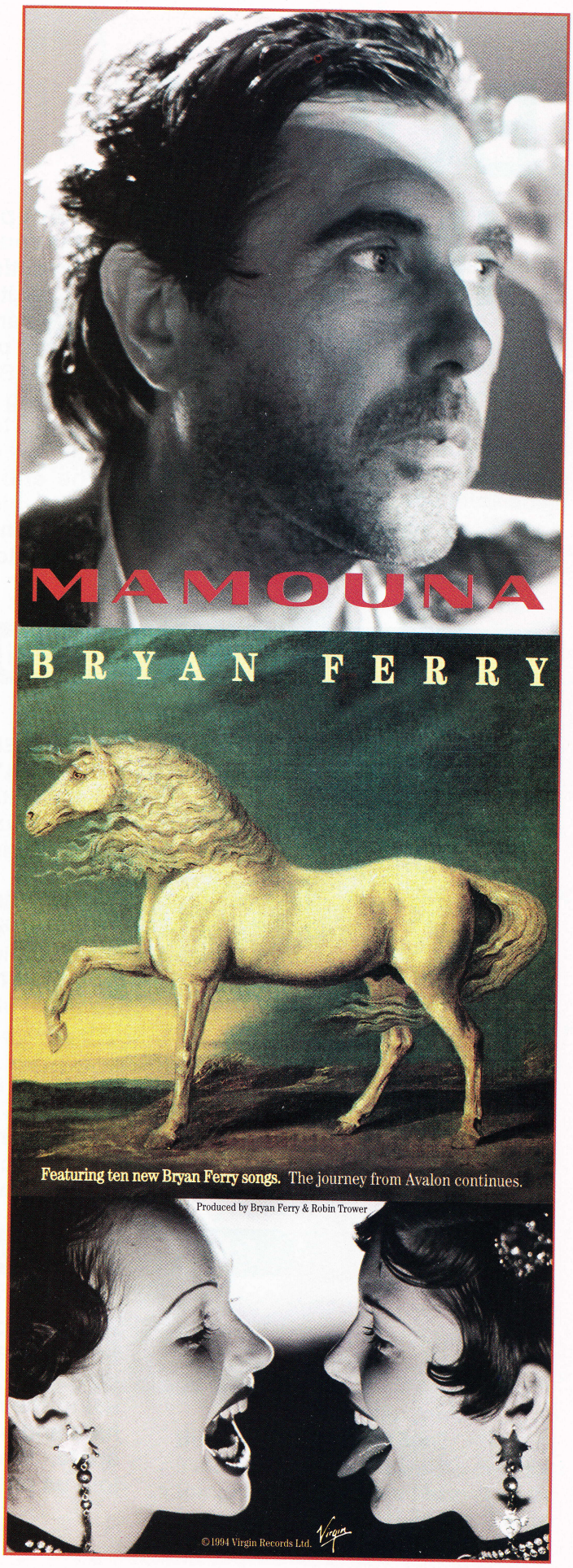
M2: VR technology would seem a logical step.
GC: Maybe we have too much of this old ego in us still that we are presenting product that is non-interactive. It is something worth thinking about, but obviously at the moment the technology isn't quite there. Our music does represent this great spatial surround which would obviously be fucking great to experience within the world that we are creating—in some kind of helmet and interactive land—obviously that is *there* but I'm not sure.

M2: Why did you choose to work with Liz Fraser on the *Lifeforms* single?
GC: She's one of the few vocalists that we find really evocative. Most musicians are just so linear in their thought. Like Robert Fripp—we had to edit him to fuck on that radio show because he typically wanted to play across it.

The whole analogy with us to a band would be: if you've got a stage and you try to present it as a band you'd have like 2,000 musicians each of whom came on stood around for 95% of the gig and then just raised, say, their flute and went "whoot!" Musicians would just feel too uncomfortable doing that. It might be brilliant in terms of the listening thing, it might really benefit from that flute only coming in once, but that flautist would feel so uncomfortable; they'd want to perform. That's the musician's natural instinct, to have the flute going all the way through it. The guitarist wouldn't be able to stop—he'd be all over the track! He'd maybe pause for one bar. The drum would go all the way through it. That whole method of self-indulgent musicianship is over for us. And Liz Fraser has that non-linear look—I thought so anyway, but she's far more scatty than that; it's bizarre.

There was a really heavy editing process. Then we had all the overlays, because what she does is she has a little cassette recorder, she listens to it a couple of times giving prompt points. Then she completely wings it—ad libs it—and she gets this kind of mess and starts overlaying it to get structure, to try and accentuate certain bits. So it's really complicated. That day in itself and from there onwards was quite a mess, to actually get that track into fruition.

M2: Has all the delay and politics involved in trying to secure a release affected how you feel about the single?
GC: I have a typical ambiguity. Hate it, love it, dead to it, all emotions.
BD: It's fucking excellent! [*laughs*]
GC: You always get really worried about me criticizing our own music. Suddenly you think that people out there are going to...
BD: I'm not worried! It's that *I like it*.
GC: ...people out there are gonna go, "He's right. I haven't even heard it, but this guy who made it says he's not sure about it so I'm not gonna buy it. I'm not interested!" You think that's the most interesting thing I'm saying, you know? I don't think people are that easily led, actually.
BD: All I'm saying is I like it. I like what we do.
GC: There's the positive interview, quick! There's a positive page and a negative page. There's the hippie in the corner who likes everything. We're great, you know! M2


MAMOUNA
BRYAN FERRY
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